

**Sr Patricia Egan's Reflection at
Bishop Michael's Farewell
Sacred Heart Cathedral, 29th May 2011**

Bishop Michael, the Gospel reading we've just heard and the hymn remind us that the heart of your ministry these past sixteen years has been leading us, as a community of Jesus' disciples, to continue his mission, and today we are grateful for the opportunity to acknowledge, formally and publicly, our appreciation as a diocesan community for the way you have done that.

I'm sure you remember the occasion some years ago, Michael, when you were giving a talk to us religious, and you told the story of a PhD student who was doing his thesis on donkeys. Apart from discovering that they are in fact the most popular domestic animals on earth, the student identified three groups of donkeys:

- those held in high regard as affectionate, intelligent family pets,
- those used as beasts of burden, and surprisingly -
- those used as protectors of other animals.

During a storm, for example, pedigree horses are likely to panic, stampede and injure one another, but if a donkey stands in middle of the paddock with its ears cocked to what is going on, and then gently begins to move in a circle, the horses will make their way to the donkey and calmly follow it until the danger passes.

In your talk to us that day, you went on to say there are times when, as followers of Jesus, our value is akin to that of the donkey:

- sometimes it is to offer a ministry of presence to people.
- sometimes it is to be a work-horse, doing things that only we can and must do.
- and sometimes, like the donkey, we need to be there for those who are afraid: in the centre of the arena with ears cocked listening to what is going on, helping and inspiring others to move with confidence and peace.

I'm sure the parallels with your ministry as our bishop are obvious:

- Across the diocese there are so many individuals and groups who have been grateful for your friendly, supportive presence, your compassionate care and concern for them: housebound parishioners, the sick and aged in care facilities, the children with whom you celebrated the sacraments of initiation and their families, parishioners, teachers, catechists, parish pastoral associates, members of pastoral councils and teams, religious communities, chaplains, members of the various diocesan agencies, commissions and apostolic groups. Apart from your personal involvement in *group* activities such as retreats, staff development and renewal days, and the like, nobody will ever know how many hours you spent with individuals, especially those who needed the church's compassion and support, and although WYD08 gave us some idea, nobody will ever know all the efforts you made to connect with young people and to support and strengthen their faith. You had a great ability to interact with all of us, young and old, in a very personable

way, never lording it over us, but willingly being there - *as one of us* - in whatever activities were asked to join.

In an article I read recently someone was quoted as saying, *"If I died today ... I'd leave this life knowing for certain that I'm loved."* In leaving your role as bishop, Michael, you must know *for certain that you are loved* by those whose 'hopes and joys, griefs and anxieties' you have shared.

- Those of us who worked closely with you in the diocesan offices know perhaps better than most people, just how hard and long you worked in your role as leader of the diocese: how you attended endless meetings and functions around the diocese and in your role as a member of the Australian and NSW Bishops' Conferences and Commissions, how you often came back to face a huge backlog of correspondence and spent time at weekends in your office catching up - *if you were not on parish visitation*. And for all that, I suspect you found that you never quite lived up to everyone's expectations: there are always some people who think there is something else you should have remembered, changed, or done differently, someone else you should have spoken to, written to, or visited. Sixteen years is a long time to carry the burdens and responsibilities of being a bishop.
- And I think we are all very aware of the parallels in your ministry with that third kind of donkey. You were there to lead the way whenever things were difficult for us as a Catholic Community, whenever the storms raged, as they frequently did in recent years. Often from a no-win position, you were courageous in speaking your truth, and listening to others speak their truth, no matter how difficult and painful it was for you. We thank you for the strength and courage you gave us as a diocesan community in difficult times.

One of your great personal gifts to us over the years has been your well-prepared, often-thought-provoking homilies, and your equally well-prepared talks whenever you were required to speak as leader of the diocese. It used to amaze me that you could do that so well and so often, despite other pressing responsibilities.

And perhaps one of the greatest achievements of your leadership has been the pastoral development of the diocese in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and our own Diocesan Synod. I well remember your first diocesan assembly, when - much to the relief of those of us involved in pastoral planning - you expressed genuine enthusiasm and support for the Synod's aim: *"To hear God's people and empower them to participate fully in Christ's mission"*.

Of course, hearing God's people can be a very demanding process when there are opposing and strongly-held views on just about every issue that arises and every plan that is proposed. In today's pluralistic world, anyone in a position of authority knows very well how difficult and time-consuming it can be, both to hear people and to reach decisions that will be supported by the community. But you never wavered in your commitment to hear God's people, and you never ceased to remind us all of our responsibility to participate fully in Christ's mission, promoting - and indeed modelling in your own ministry - the values of collaboration and co-responsibility.

The Diocesan Pastoral Council and the various diocesan agencies and structures have developed over the years under your leadership and continue to give people the opportunity to be actively involved in the pastoral leadership of the diocese. And one only has to attend diocesan liturgical

celebrations and regional and diocesan assemblies to witness the degree of faith commitment in this local Church. Just a few days ago, someone who recently returned to the diocese after an absence of some years, expressed amazement at the level of confident lay involvement she has found since her return.

That is largely due to the affirmation and encouragement you have given to adult faith development. As a staff member of the Tenison Woods Education Centre, I acknowledge the tremendous support you have given to that ministry, and indeed to all the pastoral ministries of the diocese. I know that members of our Catholic Schools system, Special Religious Education and RCIA, as well as all the diocesan agencies and groups that respond to the needs of God's people, would want me to acknowledge the unfailing support and encouragement you have given them over the years.

All your hopes and dreams for this diocesan community may not have been realised but if you are ever tempted to question the value of your efforts, remember those words of Archbishop Oscar Romero: We accomplish in our life time only a small fraction of the magnificent enterprise that is God's work. Nothing we do is complete, which is another way of saying that the kingdom of God always lies beyond us ... This is what we are about: We plant the seeds that will one day grow. We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise. We lay foundations that will need further development. Thank you, Michael, for the seeds you have sown, for the seeds you have watered, for the foundations you have laid.

Today is what Henri Nouwen would call 'an occasion when sadness and joy kiss'. We know that you are looking forward with *great joy* to your retirement, and we rejoice with you in that, as we pray that God will bless you abundantly in all the days and years to come.

Sr Patricia Egan rsj